

A full-page photograph of a person in a white protective suit and gas mask walking towards the camera. The person is wearing a white hooded suit, black gloves, and yellow boots. They are also wearing a gas mask with a filter. The background is a plain wall and a doorway.

Emergency Action

Training readies Embassy
Damascus responders

/// By J.R. Kulik

A member of the
First Responder
Team models his
protective suit.

SITUATION REPORT: At 14:35 hours, the regional security office at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, Syria, received an urgent call from the post's mail-screening facility. An employee had just opened an envelope under the facility's ultraviolet ventilation hood and discovered a white, powdery substance. The employee's weapons-of-mass-destruction training kicked in as she calmly and carefully secured the envelope in the hood and awaited the embassy-wide response effort that was about to unfold.

Within minutes of receiving word of the incident from the RSO, several members of the embassy's first-responder team gathered outside their response room and began donning their fluorescent green protective suits and respirator masks. The first responders helped each other step into the protective suits and fastidiously tape-closed any seams where a potentially lethal substance could seep in.

While the first responders prepared themselves and their equipment, the Marine security guard at Post One made an announcement informing the embassy community of the incident and instructing staff to avoid the area and await further instruction.

The first responders were ready for action almost before the announcement was over. A line of buckets and brushes was set up, and the process of decontamination was about to begin.

Fortunately, the above scenario was just that: the culminating exercise offered in a joint training effort between the Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Weapons of Mass Destruction Division and the regional security office at Embassy Damascus. Over the course of four days, instructors Drew McCan and

Doug Demskie from the WMD Division taught more than 150 American and Locally Employed Staff how to recognize and respond to WMD incidents.

Saied Shehabi, a locally employed computer management assistant, praised the instructors for building good teamwork and offering excellent examples. Shehabi should know, since this is the fourth time that he has participated in post-sponsored WMD training.

Equally impressed with the caliber of the training, Consular Officer Mimi Asnes said it was a unique opportunity to observe how local cultural and religious traditions can play a part in the way first responders interact with potential victims. In a world where one often thinks of WMD incidents in terms of a large mushroom cloud, Asnes pointed out that this training focused on the personal elements

of being hands-on with victims. She noted how respectfully both American and LE Staff members on the first responder team engaged in the decontamination exercise, simulating disrobing and thoroughly cleansing male and female colleagues, in spite of a socio-cultural paradigm that esteems modesty.

Such respect and trust are essential at a post like Embassy Damascus, where the host-country WMD response capabilities are very limited. As Office Management Specialist Teresa Thacker told the first responders, "If a WMD incident ever happens here, all we have to rely on is one another."

But Thacker had a lot more to offer than encouraging words. It was she, with the help and support of the RSO and health unit staffs, who spearheaded the idea of a more robust first responder team. This team, unlike prior versions

that existed at post, will receive further medical and safety training to augment what they learned in the WMD course. The idea is to create a cadre of well-trained volunteers who can come to the aid of their colleagues across a wide range of emergency situations. In the process, Embassy Damascus benefits from the example of teamwork, leadership and esprit de corps set by the team.

Unfortunately, real-life incidents similar to the scenario presented at the beginning of this article are becoming far too common. Recent events in which

American and other embassies around the world have received suspicious "white powder" letters lend credence to the adage that safety is everyone's responsibility. They also underscore the importance of having a group of well-trained, motivated first responders at post that can step up to address the special circumstances presented by WMD incidents, natural disasters and other large-scale events.

Thanks to the efforts of the RSO and health unit, the training by the WMD instructors, the support of post management and the dedication of every first responder, Embassy Damascus can feel safer knowing that its team is always ready to respond. ■

The author is an assistant regional security officer at Embassy Damascus and coordinator of the post's first responder team.



Above: First Responders Ala'a Al Hassany, left, and Saied Shehabi don protective suits in preparation for work on the decontamination line. **Left:** Sergeants Isaac Harrison, foreground in blue, and Stephen Rivera, background in striped shirt, are decontaminated by members of the First Responder Team.

